



# Mott Poll Report

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## Promoting Children's Independence: What Parents Say vs Do

The elementary school years are important for children to develop independence, first under parent direction and then away from direct adult supervision. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 5-11 years about their attitudes and actions related to promoting their child's independence.

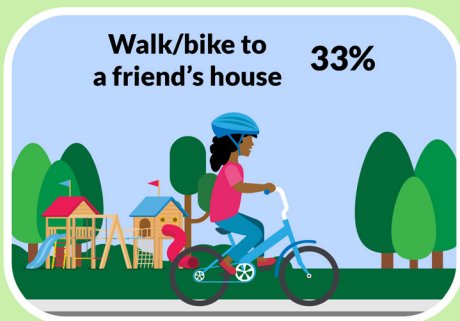
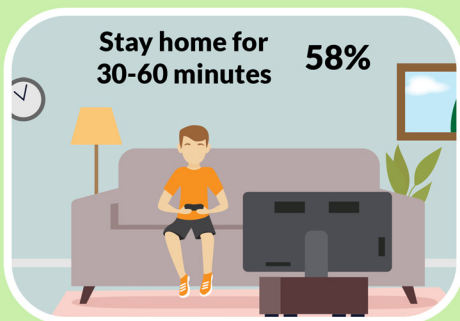
Among parents of a child 5-8 years, most (74%) say they make it a point to have their child do things themselves, when possible. However, fewer parents report their child regularly engages in actions such as talking with the doctor or nurse at health care visits (47%), deciding how to spend allowance or gift money (30%), speaking to unfamiliar adults in business situations, such as ordering at a restaurant (24%), or preparing their own meal or snack (20%). Parents say that things that get in the way of letting their child 5-8 years do things themselves include worry about the child's safety (44%), habit of how the family usually does things (38%), parent belief that the child doesn't want to do things themselves (34%) or isn't mature enough (31%), and belief that it will take too long (27%) or won't be done in the parent's preferred way (26%).

Among parents of a child 9-11 years, 84% agree that children benefit from having free time without adult supervision. Fewer parents report their child does things without an adult present, including staying home for 30-60 minutes (58%), finding an item at the store while the parent is in another aisle (50%), staying in the car while the parent runs a quick errand (44%), walking/biking to a friend's house (33%) or playing at the park with a friend (29%), or trick-or-treating with friends (15%). The top reason parents cite as preventing them from letting their child 9-11 years have time without adult supervision is worry that someone might scare or follow their child (54%); however, only 17% say their neighborhood is not safe for children to be alone. Some parents think their child isn't ready (32%) or doesn't want (28%) to do these things. Some parents believe state or local laws don't allow children that age to be alone (17%), that someone might call the police (14%), or that others will think they are a bad parent (11%) if their child is not in direct adult supervision.

Over half of parents (56%) say that unsupervised children cause trouble. One-quarter (25%) have criticized another parent, and 13% have been criticized, for not adequately supervising their child.

### Do children have enough independence?

% of parents who let their kids age 9-11 do the following without adult supervision



Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2023

### Report Highlights

3 in 4 parents say they make it a point to have their child do things themselves.

Worry is the top reason parents give for their child not doing things independently.

1 in 4 parents have criticized another parent for not adequately supervising their child.

## Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in August 2023 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 0-18 years living in their household (n=2,044). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 62% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,044 parents with at least one child age 5-11. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±2 to 5 percentage points.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

Findings from the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health do not represent the opinions of the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan reserves all rights over this material.

## C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

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## Implications

Gaining independence is a key aspect of child development and an essential parent responsibility. Becoming independent is a gradual process of allowing children increasing amounts of freedom, with parents there to teach skills, explain key information, and help the child understand consequences of their choices. As children become more experienced and comfortable with tasks, they can assume responsibility for doing them regularly. Research shows encouraging independence fosters a child's self-confidence, resilience, problem-solving ability, and mental health.

Most parents endorse the idea that children benefit from free time without parent supervision, and say they allow their child to do things themselves. But parents' description of what their child actually does independently suggests a sizable gap between parent attitudes and actions. Less than half of parents said their child 5-8 years old regularly engages in independent activities under their parent's direction, such as answering questions at a doctor's appointment, placing an order at a restaurant or other place of business, or fixing their own snack. This suggests some parents may be missing opportunities to guide their children in these "building block" tasks of autonomy. This pattern continues for older children (9-11 years old), where relatively few parents reported that their child stays home for a short period or spends time with friends without adult direction.

This Mott Poll suggests parents may be unintentionally restricting their child's path to independence. A major factor is parental worry about their child's safety. Parents may limit their child's independent activities due to highly publicized media reports, even if those outcomes are very unlikely to occur or cannot be prevented. Parents may be affected by "blame culture" – the expectation that they will be criticized if something happens to their child. This mindset reflects the finding that over half of parents felt unsupervised children cause trouble and one-quarter have criticized another parent for inadequate supervision. Some cities and states enforce criminal penalties against parents who allow their children to be alone; other states have passed "independence for kids" laws to ensure that parents can determine when and where their children are allowed to be without direct adult supervision.

Parents may take steps to decrease their anxiety as their child gains independence. If children are meeting friends at the library, mall or park, parents may check in with staff or with other parents to feel comfortable that the location is appropriate. Some parents give their child a cell phone to stay in touch; however, parents should limit cell phone use to brief check-ins, unexpected changes in plans, or true emergencies, as constant calls and texts will not help the child become more independent.

Some parents do things their child could do themselves as a means of demonstrating dedication. Paradoxically, this "helicopter parenting" can impede the child from gaining the experience and confidence necessary to become a healthy and well-functioning adult. Some experts suggest that increased rates of anxiety in children may be related to having inadequate opportunities to develop their independence.

Parents can be more purposeful about fostering independence by considering if there is a good reason not to let the child do a particular task. From there, parents can look for opportunities to encourage their child to practice new skills and experiences, particularly with grocery shopping, meal preparation or clean-up, or other everyday tasks. Since allowing a child to do things independently often requires extra time and patience, parents might avoid the early morning rush and instead choose a time and place that allows ample time for the child to practice a new skill while parents offer guidance and, when appropriate, safety tips.

Learning to interact with adults outside the family is essential; in an emergency, children should be able to seek assistance from a responsible adult. Parents can help their child learn to identify trusted adult (e.g., a staff member) and practice making a request (e.g., asking for assistance, ordering lunch). These small steps can be important, particularly for children who are shy. Over time, parents can gradually step back as the child gains experience and comfort.